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ABSTRACT

Using open-ended questions to elicit responses from 77 kindergarteners, 24 second graders, and 25 fifth graders in New York, an attempt was made to determine how children perceive the accuracy and the reality of television programs. The kindergarteners and second graders tended to restrict their observations to specific visual traits, while the fifth graders demonstrated an ability to perceive social patterns. All groups failed to systematically distinguish between television and real life, though many recognized that television outcomes (i.e., happy endings) were not representative of the real world. (EMH)

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SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS: CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF THE REALISM AND UNREALISM OF TELEVISION

A PILOT STUDY

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February, 1974

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GOALS

The pilot study summarized here had both methodological and substantive goals. The specific substantive goal was to seek more, and more valid, information on three topics:

-- how children think about the reality/unreality dimension of television.

-- whether children believe television accurately portrays social reality.

-- whether television is an important influence on children's beliefs and expectations about real life.

The methodological goal sought to discover whether the substantive questions could be answered through personal interviews with young children, specifically second graders and fifth graders. Since the methodological issue was primary in time, and perhaps in importance as well, the interview guide remained somewhat flexible throughout the interviewing. Most of the initial testing of questions was done with second graders, since they presented the greater problem. Because of continuing amendation of the interview guide and the use of second graders in the developmental phases, a number of fruitful questions were asked only in later interviews, thus excluding many second graders, and some of the fifth graders.

METHOD AND SAMPLE

Second and fifth grade interviews were conducted in the schools, generally with one child at a time, although a few two-child interviews

were conducted. Most of the interviews lasted about half an hour.

Twenty-four second graders and 23 fifth graders were interviewed. Both groups included children of low income, middle income, and upper-middle income families, and also some Spanish-speaking children. In hopes of introducing a "middle America" flavor into the sample, nine Staten Island fifth graders were interviewed; the remaining children lived in Rochester.

When the interview guide was more or less set, it became possible to try group interviews with kindergarteners. In all, twenty such group interviews were held with 77 middle class children in day camps on Long Island. Each group was asked only a few questions, and some questions asked of second graders and fifth graders were not used at all with these younger children.

While the reported findings relate almost exclusively to the children described above, eight adults were also interviewed, and the author took advantage of a trip to Australia to interview seven Australian third graders and four Australian fifth graders. The adult interviews were too few and too varied to do more than indicate that adult responses generally differ markedly from those made by the children. The Australian children were interviewed because the emergent findings suggested the presence of an important and largely culture-free influence. By and large, given the grade difference (third graders versus second graders), Australian children responded in much the same ways as did American children, and they are cited here only where they differed from the American sample.

THE FINDINGS

THE RELATIONSHIP OF COGNITIVE STAGE

The over-arching finding of this pilot study was the relevance of cognitive stage of development to the topics under inquiry. Both children's perceptive valorization and how they view the position or [illegible] of position of valorization both appear, to considerable degree, to [illegible] be a function of cognitive stage.

The literature on cognitive development is not vast to permit a [illegible] review here. However, the theories of Piaget discuss the [illegible], but familiarity with his concept of the developmental stages is [illegible] to the interpretation of the data of this study.

Piaget posits four stages in cognitive development, and the children of this study fall into the two middle stages. The kindergarteners, ages five and six, are in the second half of the preoperational [illegible]. The second graders, ages seven and eight, are at the transitional [illegible] between preoperations and concrete operations, and the fifth graders, ages 10 and 11, are in the latter half of the stage of concrete operations.

According to Piaget, preoperational children [illegible] are characterized by three cognitive orientations or patterns which is particularly relevant to this study. First, they tend to [illegible] primarily on the purely perceptual (i.e. emotionally vivid) aspects of their immediate environment. Second, their scope of attention is [illegible] very narrow: they see only a small part of the environment, [illegible]

to focus on only one dimension of the available data. Thus, when categorizing objects, they might use a toy car or a girl are alike because they both move. Next, these children lack in personal social maturity and independence, without perceiving the interrelations among the various events. Have these persons lack the ability of peer appropriate children to generalize.

Immature appropriate children are more attracted to interact with older persons. They are less personality based, more aware and might pay more peer pressure. Who might still look to parents as the basis of authority, perceptual aspects of the objects are, for example, that girl and house, they are also interest in the price of exercise ("these cards can open in half"). The ways of processes to infer the immature appropriate children, noticing how a focus on several dimensions of a situation and to the interrelations between the dimensions. And these children are able to perceive more interrelated between events, certain that perceiving and event as being independent. They are capable of a greater degree of generalization, although they are yet not able to focus on some of such interactions. Despite the similarities between the two groups, the immature appropriate child is experiences often gets focused and reasons to the flexibility.

Though also some that even reference to level of cognitive development with to lower within-unit age group, and that are given better level of behavior with are, in all cases, to perform + to age or close enough or as median, have advanced cognitive skills. There are three of immature children groups are visible behaviorally the lowest more among the children have another. However, this subtest report with

here. Although the cognitive quality of the replies was limited, both similarities and differences were noted in all grade groups, and not infrequently by individual children.

The lack of saliency of the realism dimension, the perception of television as different from real life in regard to three specific crude patterns, and the frequent citations of both similarities and differences in comparisons of television and real children and families all strongly suggest that children make no basic overall assumptions about the realism or unrealism of television or of programs.

THE INFLUENCE OF TELEVISION ON CHILDREN'S BELIEFS AND EXPECTATIONS

The influence of television on children's beliefs about and expectations of the social world would presumably be maximized

-- if the realism of television were a matter of interest and saliency, and/or

-- if children came to their television programs with an underlying belief in the realism of television, and

-- if children perceived the many patterns and implicit messages of television.

However, as has been shown, none of these conditions in fact appear to obtain. We would therefore predict that the influence of television on children's beliefs about the nature of social reality is limited. And this indeed appears to be the case.

Television and Real Life: Three Patterns Compared

The previously discussed comparisons between television and real life in regard to happy endings, "good guys" victorious, and police efficiency

all indicate that, at the very least, children of these ages do not systematically use television as a guide to the nature of real life. In reference to the three topics studied, the real world itself, rather than television, appeared to be the typical basis of their views of reality. (Some explicitly cited personal experiences, experiences of people known to them, and the news media as the bases of their beliefs.)

Treatment of an Injured Child

On some frequently viewed family programs (e.g. The Brady Bunch, The Courtship of Eddie's Father) there is considerable indulgence of children, and the families are affluent and highly child-centered. Do such programs lead children to expect real families to echo the lavish attentions bestowed by such television families?

Early in the interview, before television was mentioned, the children were asked how a real family would probably cheer a child suffering from a broken leg and spoiled plans (a picnic and circus visit had been planned). Kindergarteners and second graders mentioned visits, presents, and shots and pills for pain. A few suggested sit-down games, saying "nice things," and telling funny stories. Fifth graders more often concentrated on the outings, variously suggesting that the family would try to take the child despite the leg cast or that the outings would be rescheduled. In short, the children's expectations were modest and realistic. Their own experiences rather than the often over-solicitous and affluent television families they have seen seem to have been the chief and perhaps only influence on their expectations.

Image of Police

In a content analysis by DeFleur (1964)*, the image of the police presented by television was found often to be negative. Policemen were generally presented as "hardened and brutal" and not overly competent. "Private investigators were...clearly more capable than the police." If television still presents the negative stereotype described by DeFleur, the children** either failed to perceive the stereotype or rejected it as uncharacteristic of real police. To these children, police were "kind," "nice," "helpful," and "smart". Less than a handful noted that policemen could be either "nice or mean"; none described the police as brutal, hardened, or incompetent.

Aspirations -- Who Would You Choose To Be Like?

The influence of television on children's aspirations was crudely tapped by the opening question of the interview:

> If you could be like anyone in the whole world when you grow up, who would you choose to be like?

For most of the children in all three grade groups, the influence of television on aspirations appears to be slight or nonexistent. The children often cited occupations infrequently portrayed on television; they cited a wide variety of occupations; the occupations over-represented on television (e.g. entertainer, detective, police) did not predict their choices; the specific people they chose were most often real people

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*DeFleur, Melvin, "Occupational Roles as Portrayed on Television." Public Opinion Quarterly, 28, 1 (Spring, 1964), 57-74.

**Kindergarteners were not asked any questions about police.

personally known to them. However, television appears to have had a significant influence on the aspirations of a minority of kindergarteners. (Fourr children, for example, said they wanted to be like Batman or Superrman.) Among second graders television may have influenced the choicces of the minority who wanted to be nurses or policemen, both of whichh are among the occupations over-represented on television. (Homz, however, chose doctor or detective.) Among fifth graders, there appears to bee no evidence of the influence of television.

Summary

In rrelation to the specific topics tested, the influence of television on chhildren's beliefs and expectations about social reality is clearly quitte limited. The data however deal only with a limited number of specific facets of social reality, and do not indicate that children never generalize from television to real life. They rather show that chilldren do not consistently do so, even in reference to topics as far removed from their own experience as the efficiency of police in apprrehending criminals. (continued)

METHODOLOGICAL FINDINGS

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF QUESTIONS

The pilot study confirms the author's initial assumption that simple dichotomous closed-end questions cannot elicit meaningful data on these topics. Open-end questions or closed-end questions with probes are necessary in order to discover how the child structures the question (i.e., what it means to him); they are also necessary to an understanding of his answers.

It is not possible to provide a set of rules which describe the kinds of questions which will or will not work with children of these ages. However, one can begin, perhaps, by noting that questions meaningful to an adult will not necessarily prove meaningful to children. The most fruitful guides to what children will find meaningful are the literatures on cognitive development and learning and the children themselves. Conversations with children will inevitably reveal recurrent topics which are salient and meaningful to them, and such recurrent topics tend to be likely candidates for questions. In short, once one discovers, advertently or inadvertently, how children think one can, with some confidence, formulate fruitful questions.

SUMMARY APPENDIX A: A NOTE ON MINORITY RESPONSES

A small minority of kindergarteners and second graders noted more meaningful differences between television and real life than have been here described. Some examples of such perceptions follow.

Kindergarteners

"The kids got along o.k. No fight."

"They got late so many memes."

"Oh, they act perfect all the time."

"The grown-ups are too dressed up."

Second graders

"They want to live and not die. And they want to love each other and not love the persons."

"...on television they only show half of it. They don't show the whole story. Only thirty minutes or an hour."

Among fifth graders, a minority made very limited and literal comparisons which were akin to those typically made by the younger children.

"Some are older and some are younger."

"He's a boy. He's younger and I'm older, and I got bigger eyes and more hair than he does."

"They have different things than we have. (What kind of things?) Things like parents and sisters and brothers. And they do different things. (What kind of things?) They're on TV and we're in school."